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Clickolage: Encouraging the Student Bricoleur through Social Media

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Abstract

This article explores how the concept of bricolage can help us to understand the ways in which students learn by using, adapting and linking social media in new ways. This can involve “unlearning” the more traditional, linear, text-based ways of learning that are still the norm within many anthropology departments. However, using digital resources in this way goes beyond bricolage in that it is an open-ended, ongoing, collaborative process. With this in mind the concept of “clickolage” is introduced to highlight how students can learn from their relationship with multimedia objects, and each other.

Introduction

The concept of bricolage has been re-worked and adapted for many situations. At its simplest bricolage is contrasted with the abstract thought of the scientist, and is about relating to things as things (Levi-Strauss 1966). Bricolage is a “science of the concrete” involving interactions with the physical world as well as ideas. If scientists patiently build up their learning about the world, incrementally improving their understanding of it, the bricoleur dives straight in and plays around with their knowledge to see what works. Teaching and learning have similarly been based on such incremental views of acquiring knowledge. For a diverse and complex subject like anthropology such models can be unhelpful. Students who have not studied anthropology previously face the prospect of being overwhelmed if they attempt abstract holistic understanding from the start. This paper will argue that through unlearning such methods, via social media, the student and teacher can embrace a more anthropological way of studying anthropology.

New digital technologies present opportunities for extending the metaphor of bricolage, as the distinction between the physical and the abstract becomes blurred. A key feature of social media is the ways in which text, images and sound can be re-appropriated, shared and re-used in novel ways, encouraging non-linear readings and facilitating dialogue between the audience and the media. The word “mashup” has been borrowed from music to describe the “reuse, or remixing, of works of art, of content, and/or of data for purposes that usually were not intended or even imagined by the original creators” (Lamb 2007: 14). Whereas the term “mashup” focuses on the content, social media allows us to focus on the context, and specifically the ways in which such content is shared and enhanced through this sharing. Beyond this, Open Education Resources (OER) present multimedia resources which have been specifically licensed in ways which encourage their legitimate (re)use and adaptation by students and teachers.

Instead of presenting anthropology students with a coherent discipline through reading lists, social media can be used to present a malleable array of different media and cultural practices, approaches and ideas with which the student is encouraged to make sense of the discipline and develop an anthropological imagination. This article will explore the use of open resources and social media by introductory anthropology students, the ways in which such materials are already being used by student-bricoleurs and how this practice can be encouraged within and outside the classroom. This article will also introduce a new term, clickolage, which captures how social media can extend the concept of bricolage beyond an individual’s relationship with the world of the concrete, to incorporate a collaborative, community dimension in the context of social media, where such learning is shared and the interactions between learners become texts to be incorporated into future learning.

The rest of this article will outline how the concept of bricolage can be used to gain insight into this particular form of learning, where students are engaging with a range of social media in ways which are potentially different from their original purposes. After providing some background for this research and outlining my interpretation of the concept of bricolage, I will discuss the specific affordances of social media that make it amenable to “mashing up.” By allowing specific multimedia objects to be cut up, repurposed and shared across contexts, the nature of learning and even the nature of bricolage is challenged in interesting ways. In order to capture this new, emergent form of learning (and unlearning), the concept of “clickolage” will be introduced. The last section of this article will outline concrete practical strategies and tools, which can be used to encourage clickolage within and beyond the classroom.

Background

This article builds on a previous project by the author and a colleague, which investigated the use of YouTube videos and a playlist in teaching an introductory sociology class (Pearce and Tan forthcoming a).ⁱ A number of focus groups were carried out with students to explore their attitudes and beliefs surrounding the use of freely available video content in class. One aim of the project was to create a community playlist of YouTube videos used in teaching sociology (a similar one was put together for anthropology). These playlistsⁱⁱ were publicised amongst the C-SAP community and there was some limited interest, although not enough to sustain a freestanding community. More recently JISC has launched a similar project focussed across all disciplines called Edmediashareⁱⁱⁱ and the videos collated as part of the YouTube project can now be found there as well. The existence of these videos, and the students’ interest in them, suggest that there is a large amount of multimedia content of relevance to teaching and learning in these disciplines.

During the course of the research it became clear that a number of students were using YouTube and other social media sites to enhance their studies. Whilst this was encouraged as part of the project (through the playlists) the level of social media use went beyond this. The YouTube playlist was considered by one student as a “modern day reading list” a starting point for engaging with this material. In addition to this the students were keen to share their findings with others in a social setting. The discovery that students were using social media to support their learning and were keen to share the resources they found led to a SCORE fellowship to explore this further. The Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE) is a project based at the Open University which seeks to support the use and re-use of open content. Generally the focus is on the use and reuse of content by teachers, but the author’s fellowship proposed to investigate the development of students as “content scavengers,” who would seek out and share potentially useful content for their course via social media.

Bricolage

Claude Levi-Strauss introduced the bricoleur in *The Savage Mind* (Levi-Strauss 1966). The concept of bricolage has been adopted and adapted beyond anthropology and the word and concept have been used in a variety of ways. It is not really in the scope of this article to provide a review of this; for the present purposes it is enough to outline a brief sketch of the term. Levi-Strauss’ wide-ranging work drew on a number of ethnographic sources to suggest a different mode of thought to that of the analytic scientist. This “science of the concrete” was more practically oriented - the bricoleur’s way of working:

His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to *an already existent set made up of tools and materials*, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, *to engage in a sort of dialogue* with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer his problem (Levi-Strauss 1966: 18) [emphasis added].

Crucially, the bricoleur does not exist outside of their problem set. Rather than attempting to objectively interact with a separate realm, the bricoleur has to rework and repurpose existing tools and ideas to solve new problems. This interaction between the concrete world and the bricoleur is key:

The *bricoleur* works and plays with the stock. His parts are not standardized or invented; they are appropriated for new uses. An intellectual *bricoleur* does not do handwork with tools and materials, but brain work with signifiers and significations (Weinstein and Weinstein 1991: 161-2).

Bricolage has already been used to look at the practice of teachers, where the concept can play a “unifying and heuristic role in understanding and explaining teachers’ work” (Hatton 1989: 90). The teacher draws on a range

of resources to perform their role, reusing and repurposing content that has been created for other purposes, by the teacher themselves or somebody else. There is an *ad hoc* nature to their work which bricolage brings to the fore. This article will focus its attention on applying the concept of bricolage to learners and their learning, especially in a digital context that provides an enormous already-existing set of learning tools and objects. The evidence from the focus groups in the previous section suggests that there are some students who do engage in a sort of dialogue with these materials and play with them, collecting materials from a variety of sources some of which may be explicitly educational, many of which are not.

Social Media: Possibilities and Constraints

Social media can be contrasted with broadcast media, although the boundaries between the two have become increasingly blurred. Where broadcast media are transmissions of information from one to many, social media can be multidirectional and collaborative. The term social media has replaced the previous term Web 2.0, which captured a very similar shift from websites as static objects to sites which invite participation and contribution (O'Reilly 2006). Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia contain vast amounts of information which is created and curated by their users, usually for free. In addition to social media sites there are social media tools which facilitate collaborative participation although in contrast to social media these tools can be a lot more closed off to the wider public. These tools, such as blogs and wikis, allow individuals to create, share and comment on content in a more generic way and with much more control over access and the ownership of material (which is handed over to the private companies behind the social media sites). An illustrative example of the distinction between traditional and social media would be to compare BBC iPlayer with YouTube. Both sites provide an opportunity to broadcast video content through the Internet. Whereas iPlayer broadcasts proprietary content and does not allow for audience interaction, YouTube allows anybody to upload content, to share it and comment on it and this has led to what has been termed a participatory online culture (Burgess and Green 2009; Strangelove 2010).

Of course, YouTube has been used by mainstream broadcasters and the BBC has a channel which it uses to broadcast trailers and clips from its content,^{iv} and this illustrates the complex relationship between traditional and social media. Similarly, websites for traditional broadcasters allow for comments and sharing through social media sites, and this demonstrates the porous nature of the boundary between the two media types. The co-option of social media by mainstream broadcasters has led to a response from the participatory culture which YouTube originally enabled (Burgess and Green 2009). This participatory culture takes advantage of the low cost and the ease with which video content can now be created, uploaded and shared. Video blogs (sometimes called vlogs) are shared, responded to and discussed by the YouTube community (Strangelove 2010). This community of users resented the encroachment of traditional broadcasters into what they viewed as their domain (Burgess and Green 2009). The tension and confusion between traditional and social media is an important determinant of the media landscape within which the student scavengers navigate, with serious issues around privacy, ownership, licensing and appropriateness difficult to discern.

The participatory and collaborative nature of social media has the potential to significantly impact upon education. There is evidence that students are using YouTube to aid their understanding of sociology (Pearce and Tan forthcoming a). The kinds of videos being used range from professionally produced content which may or may not be legitimately shared, through to content produced by teachers or individuals. The content also ranges from that which is produced with specifically educational purposes in mind, to non-educational content which can illustrate key concepts or spark discussion and debate (Tan forthcoming). As well as video content, various other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, and blogs have been used in the classroom by higher education teachers (cf. Wankel 2011; Seo 2012).

The use of social media in education is not without its issues. Firstly, because of the informal nature of many of these sites there is a danger of blurring the boundaries between the formal learning space of the classroom and informal non-learning spaces such as Facebook. A study of the use of Facebook by students found that there was some support for its use for informal collaborations and as a "social glue" but more limited support for the idea of formal interventions and communications between the institution and students (Madge et al. 2009). There is a danger of universities encroaching on students' private space and most universities do not yet have clear guidance for staff – student interactions on these networks. Similarly, social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter can be a distraction from learning.

Another potential problem with the adoption of any new technology is that the new tool may not be used to its full potential. Despite the potentially radical affordances of social media to encourage student-centred and peer-led learning, social media may be used in ways which also reinforce already established teacher-centric practices. A study of the adoption of blogs and wikis in a UK university focussed on how the collaborative peer-led potential of social media tools sit uneasily within a university culture predicated on clear horizontal lines of authority and control, the “academy’s tendency to constrain and contain the possibly more radical effects of these new spaces” (Hemmi et al. 2009).

Related to this is the issue that many social media sites and tools are chiefly dominated by a minority of users. This is despite the fact that they allow for anybody to edit and create content. Wikipedia may have rapidly gained a level of dominance as an online reference resource, but the number of users who actively edit content is relatively minor, and unrepresentative (Panciera et al. 2009). Thus, for many users the distinguishing characteristics of social media are irrelevant, and Wikipedia and YouTube are effectively treated like traditional media sources.

A final issue with social media and of particular relevance in learning and teaching contexts is copyright. Much online content, especially multimedia content, will have been created for commercial reasons and will be protected by copyright. Students may happily, but illegally, share copyrighted material that they find online, but teachers are not in a position to condone or support this action. Copyright need not preclude sharing, or repurposing, of content, however. For example, the Copyright Licensing Agreement^v allows for limited amounts of copyright material to be copied, collated and shared with students. This can even be done online, although it has to be through a private space limited to students, such as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Similarly, copyright material can be shown to students via a hard copy (i.e. DVD) but this cannot be copied and shared with students on YouTube without breaching copyright. Therefore, whilst sharing is possible with copyright material, it is subject to constraints. There are cultural and legal changes in the process of taking place which will enable the collaborative and participatory nature of these sites and tools to be used more effectively within education. The next section will explore how this new form of education might look and will consider the implications for this on the teaching of anthropology.

Clickolage – Learning Anthropologically

We saw earlier in this article how bricolage refers to a way of thinking about the world whereby the individual interacts with and manipulates a set of already existing tools and resources in order to create new things. We have also seen how social media provide large amounts of material which, cultural and legal barriers notwithstanding, can be manipulated and interpreted in new and unexpected ways. By combining these ideas we can begin to envisage a newly emerging way of interacting with the digital world, which extends the concept of bricolage to encompass the fluid social interaction and engagement with multimedia content. Clickolage can be a useful concept to capture the essence of bricolage in a social media setting.

Clickolage refers to the self-directed creation, curation and linking of multimedia content through social media sites and tools. When a YouTube video is shared on a Facebook wall, or when somebody pulls together links and content into a blog post, that is clickolage. Making these connections and collecting these resources is in itself an important part of contemporary social networks in the broader sense, as has been explored by Guantlett (2011). Clickolage is messy and much of it may be without an ostensible purpose, but it is a significant part of many students’ engagement with the world and it could have a major impact on learning and teaching. Clickolage is an extension of bricolage in that it introduces an online aspect absent from the original conception. Whereas bricolage tends to focus on the individual bricoleur, clickolage allows us to focus on the online community of clickoleurs, facilitated through social media. Whereas the original bricoleurs were mediated by simpler technologies, the emergence of social media has enabled cooperation and collaboration at an enormously diverse scale. The sharing and co-creation of content across the globe is an integral part of social media more generally and anthropologists have been quick to emphasise the reciprocity and exchange which lies at the heart of online communities (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Clickolage represents student-centred collaborative learning through the sharing of online materials. It is particularly useful in learning about anthropology as a discipline relying upon a hugely diverse set of resources and which encourages a mode of critical thinking and engagement with these.

Supporting Clickolage Outside and Inside the Classroom

As clickolage is rooted in digital social media it can take place anywhere, outside or inside the class. Beyond the classroom this can be divided into the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) based on social media tools, and the wider web based on social media sites. Every university in the UK now has an established VLE, and often will have more than one (Jenkins et al. 2005). All of these provide a secure, private environment within which students can access course specific learning materials and tools such as discussion fora (Weller 2007). I have written elsewhere about the tendency within the use of VLEs to prioritise a limited, superficial engagement with students with negative pedagogic consequences (Pearce and Tan forthcoming b). This happens through the adoption of this technology being driven by administrative rather than pedagogic concerns and the reduction of students to unthinking button clickers. This need not always be the case if these technologies are properly implemented and the social, rather than mechanistic, pedagogies are embedded from the start.

All VLEs include social media *tools* such as blogs and wikis, although adoption by teaching staff and students can be patchy. These all provide a potential framework within which clickolage can take place. Multimedia objects can be shared, commented upon and linked together to pursue various learning objectives. As this is taking place within a closed environment this activity can be tightly monitored and, if necessary, controlled. This provides a safe and secure space for students to make links between disparate objects and demonstrate a deep understanding of the materials and subject matter in a manner which can be supported and assessed by the tutor. This control and support may be particularly relevant to some of the topics covered in a typical introductory anthropology course, such as evolution, where a large amount of non-academic content may be particularly unhelpful to students. Here the students have to unlearn their credulous relationship with digital content (e.g. Wikipedia). This highlights a problem with clickolage, where superficially attractive or relevant content may actually hinder a students' understanding of a topic (Pearce and Tan forthcoming b).

Whilst the nature of clickolage means that it will take place online, this need not preclude it from also taking place within a classroom. The concept of the "Google-jockey" has been around for a while now and is a "participant in a presentation or class session who surfs the Internet for terms, ideas, or Web sites mentioned by the presenter or related to the topic at hand" (Educause 2006). The idea is to nominate a student to contribute to the class in this way using a tablet or laptop and share their results via a projector. This role would be rotated over the length of a course. Despite the unhelpful name, the practice should encourage the use of a range of appropriate resources to locate relevant material to share with the class. Google jockeying takes what otherwise would be private, back-channel communication and makes it available to the entire class, transforming an individual activity into one that benefits the group (Educause 2006). The practice of adopting a "Google-jockey" acknowledges the fact that students are increasingly bringing their laptops or tablets with them to class. It specifically takes the practices which take place within the VLE or social media sites and makes them public to the class in a way which allows for tutor and peer engagement, support and even direction. The process of clickolage is brought out into the open, where it can be shaped and encouraged. The possible negative aspects of social media browsing such as procrastination and distraction can be mitigated through the public and open nature of the Google-jockey's browsing.

A more radical option than the Google-jockey is to encourage the use of smartphones in class. These now have the functionality to allow users to browse and share content, which could then be shared with the class via a blog, twitter or the VLE. This would be a radical departure from current practice that is more likely to ban the use of phones in class, but this has the potential to turn every student into a Google-jockey. There is always going to be an issue with trusting students to be focussed and engaged on the task in hand, as with all teaching, but this can be dealt with through careful course and session design (i.e. group work and formative assessments). My own teaching experience provides an example of this. I teach at our Foundation Centre, which means that I have a particularly diverse class of international students and local mature students. I often draw on this diversity in the class, especially when dealing with cultural anthropology. In group and class discussions my students often discuss examples from their own cultures, whether that is from Stockton-on-Tees or Singapore, and through a "Google-jockey" or the sanctioned use of their smartphones they can illustrate these examples with appropriate visual aids. These aids can be collated and shared with the other classes, and made available as a resource for student body. This can be challenging for students, who have to reassess their ideas of how a classroom and teacher should operate. They may have to unlearn their previous experience of being told about a subject, to embrace the idea of sharing their own knowledge and experiences within a setting which encourages critical engagement and reflection.

So far, we have seen how clickolage can be embedded within day-to-day learning and teaching both within and beyond the classroom. A key consideration is the extent to which students are capable of critically evaluating the content which they find. This has been called digital literacy as it is analogous to the literacy skills needed to be able to engage with text based materials (Gilster 1997; Eshet-Alkalai 2004). Digital literacy includes skills such as being aware of the sources for information, and the purposes for which it has been produced. It cannot be assumed that students who have grown up alongside such technologies are digitally literate. The phrase “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) became popular to encompass the idea that students who have been born into a world where social media is commonplace (typically born since 1983) are somehow naturally able to understand these new technologies. Whilst a popular term, the idea has been under critical scrutiny and there is little empirical evidence to support it (Bennett et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2010). It is important not to mistake the use of social media with critical engagement with these media. Therefore the skills required to critically engage with these materials need to be taught, not assumed. This can be done through incorporating clickolage within and beyond the classroom, shedding light on students’ online practices and revealing the level of support they need to adequately engage with digital resources.

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming amount of online content available to today’s students. In contrast to relatively ordered library shelves and reading lists, this content is poorly catalogued and there is no longer a clear gatekeeper to ensure academic rigour. Student and staff need to unlearn traditional ways of teaching and learning their subject, which rely on the relative safety and comfort of physical text based resources. By taking advantage of working together, sharing, curating and commenting on a variety of content, students can broaden and deepen their understanding of the world around them and develop their anthropological imagination. They can learn about the multiplicity of voices that exist on any given topic and can learn valuable digital literacy skills. This can be done for a wide range of subjects, but it is possibly of most relevance to teaching anthropology, where the ability to engage with a variety of cultures and contexts, and to make links between disparate sources, is a defining feature of the discipline. There are a variety of cultural, legal and technological issues which need to be addressed before students will critically interact with social media and engage in clickolage. This can be encouraged through appropriate course design, classroom practice and the incorporation of digital literacy education within the course. This article has focussed on these issues and hopefully provided some interesting possibilities for incorporating clickolage within and beyond the classroom.

By focussing on the social aspects of clickolage this article has extended the concept of bricolage. The bricoleur is updated and becomes part of a community of clickoleurs, who share resources and tools and interact with their materials as well as each other. Designing courses and activities that acknowledge and support clickolage will not be easy. There are serious issues regarding student focus, class control, copyright, and accessibility that need to be addressed, but a good anthropologist would always recognise the cultural practices already taking place within the student community when designing their course. This new concept emphasises the shared, messy and interactive aspects of learning which take place within any course, but which has a special place in teaching anthropology.

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ⁱⁱ Sociology playlist <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL93FF46F5BC6A27CF> and anthropology playlist <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL326F860BC88DC18C>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.edmediashare.org/>

^{iv} <http://www.youtube.com/user/BBC>

^v <http://www.cla.co.uk/>